

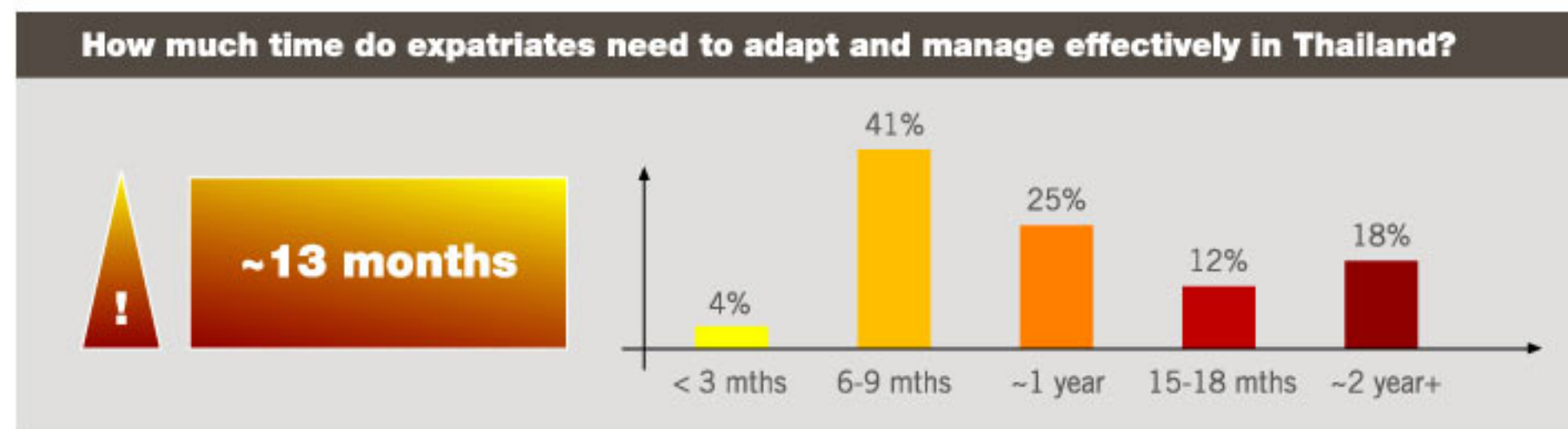


EXPATS AND THAIS AT WORK

'Same-same' or Different?

13 months is how long expats need - on average - to become fully effective in the Thai workplace. 1-2-WIN Executive Coaching and the Dutch and French Chambers of Commerce polled 300 executives from 120 companies and interviewed 28 Thai and foreign business leaders to provide foreign managers and Thais with practical insights and advice on how to work most effectively together.

In this first article of a series, executive coach Jean-Francois Cousin clarifies critical differences between Thai and western leadership models and core-value systems, shares tips for an expat's first 100 days and proposes a fun to-do list for foreign managers.



Without doubt you will have heard of stories like Martin's. He was assigned to Thailand two years ago, came with the best of intentions, and yet had a horrendous first year at work. By the end of it, half of his team had resigned and the performance of his department had decreased dramatically. Yet, Martin had been working really hard and leveraged those managerial skills which had served him well in his previous assignments: results-focused, participative, politely straightforward and good at problem-solving. Is that the recipe for failure in Thailand? Obviously not, but key ingredients for success are missing.

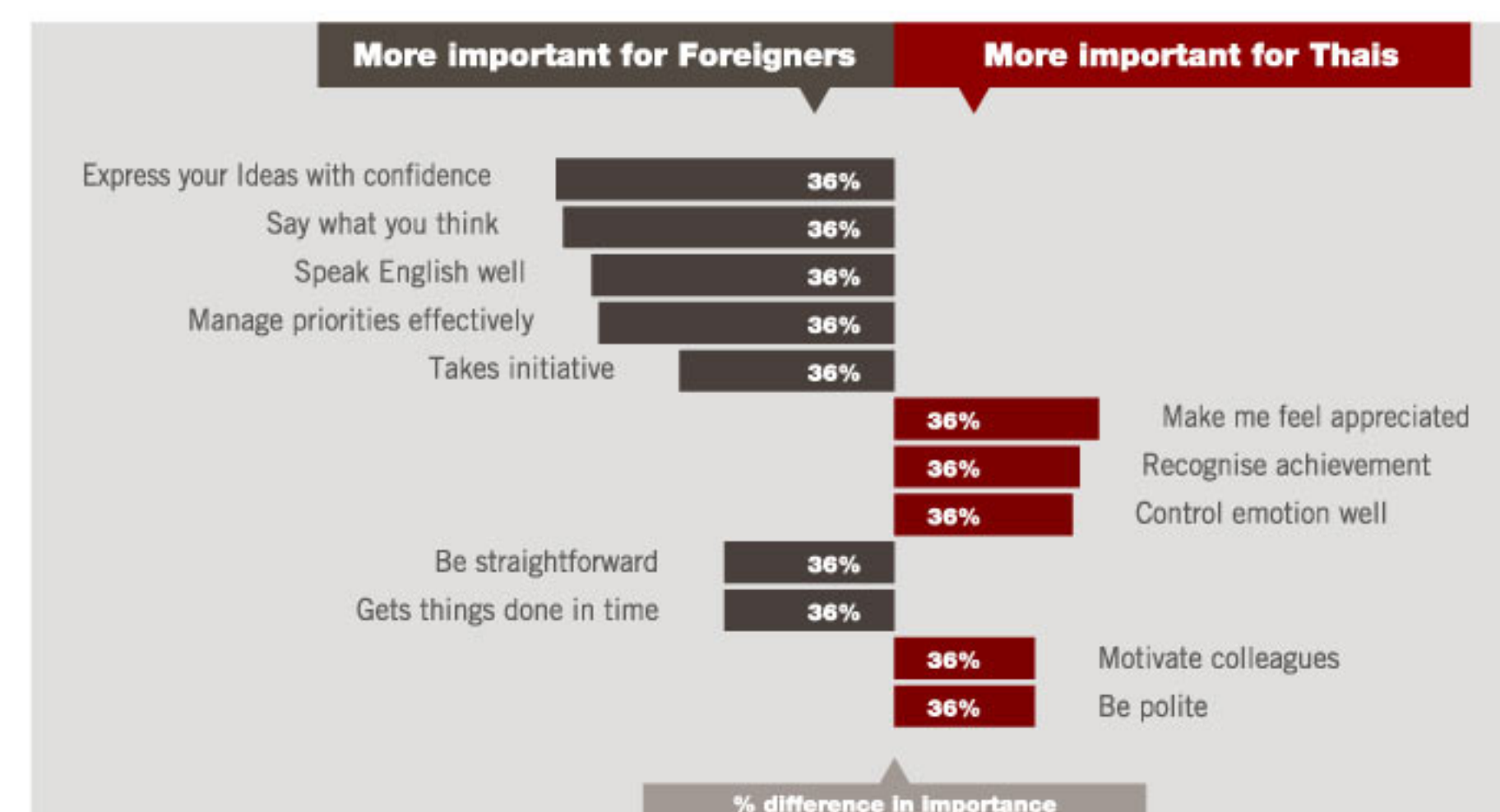
The good news is that when expatriates add certain elements, rewards can surpass their expectations. Alan Miu and Hanno Kroemer, respectively country general manager and former finance director for TNT in Thailand, have developed a good recipe: "Thai employees, in general, are very hard-working, willing to contribute and do the best they can"; "When you have them on board, basically everything is possible; ... you can make tremendous progress and achieve what you would like a lot faster." Other expatriates I work with add, "Thais can be incredibly loyal", are "eager to learn", "good

fun to work with", "have a 'can-do' attitude", and "don't hesitate in making the occasional sacrifice (holiday or over-time)."

Many Differences

Certainly, expatriates and Thais share the same desire to succeed, learn and have a good time in the work-place. However, their

preferred ways are dissimilar. Foreigners should acknowledge that, at work, what matters most for them is quite different from what matters most for their Thai colleagues. As evidence, in the survey we conducted Thais and foreigners ranked 49 managerial and interpersonal skills by importance and only four skills appear in both Thais' and foreigners' top-10 most important skills. In other words, six of the 'most important skills' for Thais are not so valued by foreigners, and vice-versa. 'Being assertive', 'saying what you think', 'managing priorities effectively', and 'taking initiative' are much more important to foreigners than to Thais, whereas 'recognition of achievements', 'making me feel appreciated', 'emotion-control' and 'ability to motivate' carry more weight for Thais than for expats.



Clearly, expatriates and Thais are on a different time-frame - foreign managers expect to stay around 3-5 years and are under intense pressure to deliver solid results quickly. But this does not explain it all. Our interviews have revealed the major differences between Thai and Western core-value systems and leadership models, and the impact they have on 'expectations from hierarchy', 'engagement', 'communication' and 'conflict management' at work.

for vision, knowledge and results, and exercising authority on the basis of rules and regulations. In comparison, the 'traditional Thai boss' is usually depicted as rather directive and truly caring, exercising a mix of 'Phradet' (authority and decision-making) and 'Prakhun' (rewarding and ensuring the well-being of employees' families), with an authority based on relationships and seniority.

and CEO of ING Life, confirms: "a lot of high-flyers who have achieved a lot in the west come here with a different attitude - 'let's-get-things-done-fast' - and then they find they hit a wall."

Getting It Right

How can a foreign manager take a good start then? Let's hear from highly successful business leaders.

Prakorn Makjumroen, chairman and CEO of Philips, suggests that "when you start your new job here, have one-on-one sessions with your direct reports, not so much on work, but rather to understand each of the people: what is their background, what they like, what they don't like, what they find interesting in their job, what they think the company should do. After a week, you will better understand your team and your priorities for the first 100 days."

Patara Yongvanich advises: "understand the true core-value system of Thais, how (they) are motivated, raised as individuals, how (they) are taught to behave as adults", and concurs that "to manage effectively in a Thai business environment, you have to understand that most of your team members have a strong concept of family, which means that you really have to emphasise the relationships, getting to know each of your team members on a one-to-one basis, ... how they are doing, how their family is doing, what pets they have, what are their hobbies; those are the things that will help you bridge the cultural gap from being a foreign manager to working very effectively in a Thai company."

In our next article, we will offer further insight and practical tips for expatriates and Thais to work most effectively together. Meanwhile, for a bit of fun, we would like to suggest that you complete a self-assessment test, downloadable from www.1-2-win.net, and that expatriates try this 'to-do' list:

1. Ask your Thai colleagues and friends to explain 'sam ruam', 'nam chai', 'krenjai', 'hai kiat' and 'bunkun'.
2. Ask them to teach you the different 'wais' and when to use them.
3. Ask your Thai colleagues to rate you of scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) on 'Phradet' and 'Prakhun'. Should you get a '4', request ideas to hit a '5' next month!
4. Invest at least one-hour a month in 1-on-1 with your key-subordinates, focusing on skills development, and learn as much as you teach them.
5. 'Plan' at least one really good time per week with your team.

"In Thailand, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."



The profound differences between core-value systems are a complex and intricate subject. Oversimplifying to make it memorable, one may say that 'achievement' is probably the most important value at work for expatriates in Thailand, where as 'nurturing good relationships' is what Thais care for the most, in and out of the office.

A consequence, obvious in our survey, is that foreigners tend to be goal-oriented and accountable, analytical, critical, creative, straightforward, assertive, occasionally aggressive, take initiative and strive for effectiveness and efficiency. On the other side, Thais - while also striving to get things done - will usually lay the utmost importance on caring for each-other, saving face, avoiding conflict, staying humble and composed (keeping bad feelings inside), showing respect (especially to hierarchy and senior people), and shall be content if work offers them the feeling of an 'extended family'.

Leading Blind

What about differences between Thai and western leadership models? In yet another simplification, one could describe the prevailing western leader as mostly participative, regarded

Where a good western-style leader gets respect, a good Thai leader gets loyalty for his power and care. Patara Yongvanich, the managing director of SAP for Thailand and the Philippines, shared this great insight: "In Thailand, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Whilst the western 'boss' is usually not perceived as 'that much higher' above other employees, the Thai 'boss' will normally be considered as well above the rest.

Communication-wise, most westerners come out as assertive in business meetings while Thais often appear more reserved. Our survey gathered several barriers - some of them specific - for a Thai person to communicate her or his ideas to a foreigner:

- Clarity of thoughts (have I clarified my ideas enough yet to communicate them?),
- English fluency (can I translate properly what I want to say?),
- Self-confidence (am I sure my input is worthwhile for the others?),
- Respect for seniority (am I in a high-enough position here to express myself?),
- Humility (shall others perceive me as arrogant to over self-assured?),
- Perception of urgency (can I wait for a more comfortable moment?),
- Fear of rejection,
- Risk to intrude or embarrass.

Hence, 'to speak out or not to speak' is quite a question for a Thai professional. Other differences between western countries and Thailand have a significant impact in the workplace, for example: the number of job openings, the education systems' focus, information about the 'outside world', conflict management styles, etc, and we will explore some of them in our forthcoming articles.

In 'Amazing Thailand', the first 100 days can be quite a maze for expatriates. And the 'high-achiever, self-reliant' profile is most at risk. As Rajesh Sethi, president